

Black Bodies/Libidinal Economies in Barry Unsworth's *Sacred Hunger*

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Abstract:

Barry Unsworth's Booker prize winning novel, *Sacred Hunger* (1992) explores the Middle Passage from the perspective of two central protagonists: Erasmus Kemp, the son of a slave ship builder and owner of the *Liverpool Merchant*, and Matthew Paris, his cousin and the ship's doctor. The novel asserts that the "sacred hunger" of the slave trade is the desire for making money, at any cost. In this essay, we argue that one cost, the novel suggests, is the commodification of women's bodies, particularly black captive women entering the trade. Exploring this libidinal economy, we examine the role of the ship's doctor, in Paris, as the keeper of the gateway to slavery; the sexual exploitation of both black and white women, and Unsworth's use of the trace-in this case, the elusive figure of the Paradise Nigger, or Luther Sawdust, who is Paris' son, Kenke, conceived in a new settlement based on democracy, undertaken in Florida and engaged in by both blacks and whites from the wrecked *Liverpool Merchant*. Capitalism, through human competition, enters that community, which, ultimately, is destroyed as Kemp discovers it and retakes his property. The Paradise Nigger represents a counter-memory and counter-force: a hope that the repetition of master-slave dichotomy in the libidinal economy can be interrupted by something "other" that suggests alternative shapes of human freedom.

Key Words:

Sacred Hunger, Barry Unsworth, slave trade, black bodies, libidinal economy, ship surgeon

In the middle of Barry Unsworth's mammoth Booker prize winning novel, *Sacred Hunger* (1992),¹ Erasmus Kemp, one of the two central protagonists, chairs a meeting in Covent Garden of the Trionfi Club, a meeting of all the colonizing and slaving associations in England active in 1765. Kemp is an investor in the Africa trade, which he sees as "sane and healthy" (411), as it makes England independent of other nations. The meeting reaches its highest moment when the Italian sugar chef, Signor Gasperini, unveils his masterpiece: The Sable Venus (417). His attendants bring in

[a] three-foot high model of a negress fashioned in chocolate. Except for bracelets, anklets, and pearl color, which were all made of sugar-crystal droplets, and the red sugar-paste rose in her hair, she was naked (417).

This confection is all sugar, the crop that fuels the British slave trade, and the men, to "profane advice," (417) choose pieces of this body to consume. After, prostitutes enter the room, and the men are served sexually, consuming more women's bodies.

The "sacred hunger" of the novel is capitalism, the desire for more and more money. Delblanc, the artist who ends up as a passenger on the slave ship which serves as the setting for much of the novel says, "[m]oney is sacred, as everyone knows [...] [s]o then must be the hunger for it and the means we use to obtain it." (325) The novel describes the slave ship as "a member of a vast fleet sent forth by men of enterprise and vision all over Europe engaged in the greatest commercial venture the world had ever seen, changing the course of history, bringing death and degradation and profits on a scale hitherto undreamed of." (130) Spanning roughly over a decade, Unsworth's vast historical novel is set in the mid eighteenth-century and divided

¹ Barry Unsworth, *Sacred Hunger* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993). [Thereafter, we will cite this work parenthetically by page number.]

into two significant books: the first beginning in 1752 and 1753, and the second occurring in 1765. The novel charts the story of the fortunes of two cousins who possess very different ideological outlooks, but whose lives are fundamentally entwined over the fate of the slaver, the *Liverpool Merchant*. Erasmus Kemp, whose family's wealth depends on the slave ship voyage which ultimately fails, is the novel's archetypal capitalist. He stands in contrast to Matthew Paris, an idealistic but discredited physician, grudgingly hired by the Kemps as the ship's surgeon. The cousins are antagonists. Erasmus resents his cousin, because he believes Paris belittled by him in a childhood incident in which Paris saved his life. Paris, who is a scientist, has lost his wife and his reputation because of his belief in evolution. When Paris' uncle, Kemp Senior, offers him the job of ship's surgeon, Paris takes it because he must. The novel then follows Erasmus Kemp in Liverpool repairing his father's reputation and fortune when the *Liverpool Merchant* is lost at sea, and Paris who is on the ship, which wrecks following a mutiny, and who, with its sailors and Africans, attempts to found an egalitarian colony for both blacks and whites based on Enlightenment principles in Florida. Both the slave trade, as Paris experiences it, and the Enlightenment settlement are centered on the black female body. To explore how slaves connect a British slave ship and a North American free settlement in the novel, and therefore how the novel reflects on the transatlantic history of slavery which connects Britain and North America, we want to consider the black body as a commodity circulating between these spaces. We will first discuss the nexus between the black female body-and, indeed, the white female body-and commodity in what Jean-François Lyotard calls the "libidinous economy." Second, we will examine the surgeon as a key figure of this economy. The surgeon was a combination of archivist, appraiser, and, simultaneously, torturer and healer. We will look, in particular, at one passage in Unsworth's novel to make the connection between

sexual license and categorization in the novel. Finally, we will speak of the Florida settlement and its dependence on black bodies-its inability to escape race, class, and gender hierarchies completely-and how it, nevertheless, suggests a potential freedom in the *Paradise Nigger*, the aged and dying mulatto beggar featured in the prologue and the epilogue. The *Paradise Nigger*, we learn, is Paris' son by a freed African slave woman, born on the "paradise" established by his father, and the putative inspiration for the authoring of the novel by the narrator. The *Paradise Nigger* articulates the counter-memory to the "terror of history,"² as Mircea Eliade calls it: the sense that history is "made" on the unnamed suffering of ordinary persons-here, the countless black men and women. He is not powerful, but *The Paradise Nigger* remembers and he tells. He defies the idea that he is not exceptional. He claims his free birth, and he proudly claims his white English father, who was a doctor; he remembers his time in the "paradise place" (629), and he claims his ability to read.

Black Bodies

While the utopian spirit of the *Paradise Nigger*, and the interracial harmony and love that he symbolizes, haunt the margins of the novel, at the center of *Sacred Hunger* is the body: the black body, male and female, but also white women's bodies, all of which are consumed by or for "the trade." Covent Garden, where the Trionfi Club meets, was the London theater district and a site of active prostitution in 18th and 19th century England. As many as 20% of women, because of poverty, ended up as prostitutes, and most prostitutes were teenagers, "servicing" customers in brothels, alleys, or in the open. One foreign visitor to England was startled "by the

² Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), 139.

ways a man could have a woman: ‘dressed, bound up, hitched up, tight-laced, loose, painted, done up or raw, scented, in silk or wool, with or without sugar’.”³

This emphasis on sugar is important. Clare Midgley, in “Slave Sugar Boycotts,” writes, “In the eighteenth-century sugar was Britain’s largest import by value [...] [and] by the end of the century rum consumption reached almost a quart *per capita* annually.”⁴ This led the English poet William Cowper, an abolitionist, to write in “Pity for Poor Africans” (1788),

I pity them greatly, but I must be mum

For how could we do without sugar and rum?

Especially sugar, so needful we see?

What? Give up our desserts, our coffee, and tea!⁵

We want to take the time to emphasize the importance and connection between women and sugar, because the slave trade undergirded the everyday life of the English public. At the center, therefore, of slavery sits an awful conversion and the terror of abstraction. As Greg Forter has argued, “Unsworth’s novel attempts [...] nothing less than a cognitive map [...] of racial capitalism in the Atlantic world of the eighteenth century.”⁶ At its center is the black woman’s sexual production that becomes the true “engine of empire.” As Katherine McKittrick writes in

³ Kirsten Olsen, *Daily Life in 18th Century England* (Santa Barbara California: Greenwood Press, 1999), 49.

⁴ Clare Midgley, “Slave Sugar Boycotts, Female Activism and the Domestic Base of British Anti-Slavery Culture,” *Slavery and Abolition* 17, no.3 (1996): 143–4.

⁵ William Cowper, “Pity for Poor Africans (1788). “Slavery and Emancipation in American History and Memory.”
<http://glc.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Slavery%20and%20Emancipation%20in%20Western%20Culture.pdf>_(accessed 25 November 2018).

⁶ Greg Forter, “Atlantic and Other Worlds: Critique and Utopia in Postcolonial Historical Fiction,” *PMLA* 131, no.5 (2016): 1330.

Demonic Grounds, the black female body becomes territorialized, open to “rape-ability, as fertile bodies are necessary to work fertile American land.”⁷

This cognitive map is thus, according to Forter, fundamentally a materialist one. Indeed, it is one that involves the awful conversion that transforms persons into materiality, monetary exchange, and globalizing process-as in the Papal Bull of Nicholas V *Romanus Pontifex* (January 8, 1455) - in which religious conversion is elided into profit.⁸ As Walter Johnson explains, “[t]he whole point of plantation slavery [...] was this chain of capitalist mutations: from lashes into labor into bales into dollars into pounds sterling.”⁹ Ian Baucom has also argued that slaves functioned in a financial system “simultaneously as commodities for sale and as the reserve deposits of a loosely organized, decentered, but vast trans-Atlantic banking system.”¹⁰ More specific to the way the novel both presents and critiques slavery conceived as part of the history of finance and colonial capitalism in the ways that both Forter and Baucom argue, we want to suggest black bodies, particularly black women’s bodies, in these conversions have been worked over in every possible way. They have been “gazed on,”¹¹ as George Yancy puts it, fetishized¹²

⁷ See p. 45 and p. 78 in Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

⁸ Pope Nicolas V gives the King Alfonso the right to exploration of Africa. Even as the pope hopes for pagan conversions to Catholicism, he acknowledges that Alfonso will “convert” what he finds “to his profit and his future family’s profit.” See Nicholas V, “The Bull *Romanus Pontifex*” (January 8, 1455). <https://www.nativeweb.org/pages/legal/indig-romanus-pontifex.html> (Accessed 25 November 2018).

⁹ Robin Einhorn, “Water and Soil, Grain and Flesh: Walter Johnson Reconsiders the Connection Between Slavery and Capitalism,” *The Nation* (February 24, 2014). <https://www.thenation.com/article/water-and-soil-grain-and-flesh/>. (Accessed 25 November 2018).

¹⁰ Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005):61.

and, therefore and thereby, processed¹³; constructed and deconstructed; commodified and consumed; used for pleasure; tortured, subjugated and displayed,¹⁴ which were other forms of pleasure¹⁵; disciplined, and studied¹⁶--and the list can go on and on. Forter, writing about the novel, and about Paris' role in the penetrative physical examinations of the slaves on sale, argues that "attending to the most intimate, bodily forms of subjugation, [...] reveals how racial capitalism works by transmuting human particularity (including the bodily) into abstract monetary value."¹⁷ But it is not just the bodily, but bodily violence and bodily sexualised violence against women, in particular, that this essay explores. Robin Einhorn offers a bleak summary in her review of *River of Dark Dreams* (2017), Walter Johnson's study on the

¹¹ George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America* (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 2017), xii, 2, 11.

¹² See Anthony Paul Farley, "The Black Body as Fetish Object," *Oregon Law Review* 76, no.3 (1997): 457-535. Farley writes, "race is "a form of pleasure in one's body which is achieved through humiliation of the Other and, then, as the last step, through a denial of the entire process (474)."

¹³ See Egbert Alejandro Martina, "The Delicious Pleasures of Racism," <https://processedlives.wordpress.com/2013/10/15/the-delicious-pleasures-of-racism/>. (Accessed 25 November 2018).

¹⁴ As, for example, the "Hottentot Venus," Sara Baartman. See Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and The Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and A Biography* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010).

¹⁵ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 26.

¹⁶ As in, for example, The Moynihan Report of 1965, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." <http://www.blackpast.org/primary/moynihan-report-1965>. (Accessed 25 November 2018).

¹⁷ Forter, "Atlantic and Other Worlds: Critique and Utopia in Postcolonial Historical Fiction," 786.

slaveholding South and its role in the capitalist transatlantic world of the first half of the nineteenth century. Einhorn persuasively asserts that satisfaction derived from violence against slaves depended “on the fact that their victims were human beings capable of registering slaveholding power in their pain, terror, grief, submission, and even resistance.”¹⁸

[Johnson] describes the horrifying daily violence inflicted on slaves - over and over, and in prose intended to shock, as if readers might fail to appreciate the fundamental evil of slavery. Extensive discussions of torture define “the human condition of owning” as “the condition of gazing, claiming, supervising, delighting, penetrating, climaxing, and maiming at will.” Planters starved their slaves, used food to control them, and then gloated about the results in rhetoric that “processed starvation into racism.” They raped women to “convert their own semen into capital,” but such “forcible genital penetration of enslaved women by white men” was only part of their perverse sexual violence, which included stealing the milk of lactating women by forcing them to nurse “children too young to know that they owned the breast from which they hungrily sucked,” and dressing children in cheap shifts that exposed “their buttocks and genitals—their penises, their pudenda.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Robin Einhorn, “Water and Soil, Grain and Flesh: Walter Johnson Reconsiders the Connection Between Slavery and Capitalism.” *The Nation*, February 24, 2014. <https://www.thenation.com/article/water-and-soil-grain-and-flesh/> (accessed 25 November, 2018).

¹⁹ Robin Einhorn, “Water and Soil, Grain and Flesh: Walter Johnson Reconsiders the Connection Between Slavery and Capitalism.” *The Nation*, February 24, 2014. <https://www.thenation.com/article/water-and-soil-grain-and-flesh/> (accessed 25 November, 2018).

The body, then, becomes the sign of *cathexis*, the investment of mental, emotional, and/or libidinous energy-psycho energy, love, and pleasure-towards one object: money.

To envision how black bodies are transformed into money, we could consider the image of a Mobius strip that Jean-François Lyotard uses for his theory of the “libidinal economy.” The strip is a circular structure with only one side and one edge, with no inside or outside, and no fixed orientation, except itself. One “could walk on a Mobius strip on a single surface indefinitely.”²⁰ For Lyotard, this libidinal Mobius energy is focused into systems and structures, which use these energies for their own ends. The libidinal economy dissimulates, for Lyotard; it is “duplicitous,” as one dimension of power connects with another and becomes hegemonic: “[...] the only way libidinal energies can exist is within structures.”²¹ In other words, structures also allow one part of hegemonic power to hide it, overlap and connect with another part.

Lyotard did not think about applying his theories to transatlantic slavery. Saidiya Hartman, an African-American woman, has most applied postmodern theory to slavery, seeing “the convergence of terror and pleasure” in its libidinal economy. In her essay, “Venus in Two Acts,” she examines the role of the archive in this economy: the cataloging and categorizing of the black woman, rendering her nameless and voiceless, even as she is scrupulously described and exploited. Hartman argues that the archive is a mortuary, a symbol of the fact that these women, entering the hold of the slave ship, entered into a mechanism that organized death.²²

²⁰ “What Is a Mobius Strip?” <https://wonderopolis.org/wonder/what-is-a-mobius-strip>. (Accessed 25 November 2018).

²¹ Ashley Woodward, “Jean-François Lyotard,” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/lyotard/#H3>. (Accessed 25 November 2018).

²² Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 4-6.

The archive normalizes power and violence as it erases particular stories. *Les Mots et les Choses* (*Words and Things*), the French title of Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966) illustrates the terror of the archive's abstraction: that words order things, creating taxonomies and categories that regulate and, similar to what Mark Godfrey points out about abstract art, that the archive "does not allow us to interpret [...] with reference to what is depicted."²³ The archivist, as Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz write, may be seen as "a passive guardian of evidence, a neutral custodian never doing appraisal, and a selfless devotee of Truth,"²⁴ suggesting an "original order." Cook and Schwartz continue: "Archives [...] 'are not passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, confirmed.' In the archive, a truth is ordered in conjunction with 'the available terrain and network of relations,' that what an epoch or society understood to be a "rational order" emerges."²⁵

That order is made as we categorize. The Renaissance, according to Foucault, understood the world by similitude, similarity, creating an organic whole, in which there is no gap between words and things. During the Classical Period, which Foucault considered extending from the 17th century into the 19th, otherness, and a "spirit" of curiosity about that otherness, pervaded the culture, opening a "locus in the gap that is now opened up between things and words—a silent gap, pure of all verbal sedimentation, and yet articulated according to the elements of representation."²⁶ This marks "a major conflict between a theology that sees the providence of

²³ Mark Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007): 4.

²⁴ Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz, "Archives, Records, and Power: From (Postmodern) Theory to (Archival) Performance. *Archival Science* 2(2002): 174-175.

²⁵ George Steiner, "The Mandarin of the Hour-Michel Foucault," *The New York Times: Books* (February 28, 1971). <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/12/17/specials/foucault-order.html>. (Accessed 25 November 2018)

²⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 141.

God and the simplicity, mystery, and foresight of his ways residing beneath each form and in all its movements, and a science that is already attempting to define the autonomy of nature.”²⁷ It is not, Foucault argues, that thinkers know more; they simply reclassify and represent that information. The “words that had been interwoven in the very being of the beast have been unraveled and removed: and the living being [...] appears as though stripped naked.”²⁸ New “privileges,” Foucault writes, were “accorded to observation,” not in the sense of theater but in the sense of catalogue.²⁹ The discipline that emerged, Foucault argues, is “natural history.” Terry Wheeler, a professor at McGill University defines natural history for the non-scientist:

Natural history spans disciplines. It flows through science and painting and poetry and photography and literature and walks in the woods. It’s hard to pin down. My friend and colleague Tom Fleischner defines natural history as: *a practice of intentional, focused attentiveness and receptivity to the more-than-human world, guided by honesty and accuracy*. I like that. It’s broad, it’s inclusive. It nicely encompasses both scientific and non-scientific approaches to natural history [...]. Natural history addresses the questions what is it? what does it do? to what is it connected?

²⁷ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 138.

²⁸ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 141.

²⁹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 137.

In a scientific context, I consider natural history as the search for, and description of, patterns in nature.³⁰

Natural history, in its definition, admits the amateur observer. In relation to slavery, as Jennifer Morgan puts it, the quantification of the trade is helpful, but it also “serves Western Rationalism” and is “rooted in a perverse arithmetic.”³¹ The Middle Passage, Morgan argues, “is perhaps the foundational moment where the rationality of capitalism met its most unspeakable violence.”³²

The excesses of sexuality combine with the age of observation in a terrible way in the slave trade, with women’s bodies the object of sexual excess and a bizarre kind of “study.” In the novel, Matthew Paris is faced with this dehumanization. Alexander Falconbridge’s *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa* (1788), as Gesa Mackenthun suggests in *Fictions of the Black Atlantic in American Foundational Literature*, “has disseminated into fictional discourse,” and Unsworth develops Falconbridge into a fictional character in Paris.³³ (184). Falconbridge was a British surgeon, a role with lesser status than a doctor,³⁴ on four voyages between 1780

³⁰ Terry A. Wheeler, “What is Natural History Anyway?” *Lyman Museum at McGill University* (blog). September 29, 2012. <https://lymanmuseum.wordpress.com/2012/09/29/what-is-natural-history-anyway/>. (Accessed 25 November 2018)

³¹ Jennifer L. Morgan, “Accounting for ‘The Most Excruciating Torment’: Gender, Slavery, and Trans-Atlantic Passages,” *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 188.

³² Morgan, “Accounting for ‘The Most Excruciating Torment’: Gender, Slavery, and Trans-Atlantic Passages,” 203. Morgan notes, interestingly, that none of the critics of the state and bio-power—from Hannah Arendt to Giorgio Agamben—write about the slave trade.

³³ Gesa Mackenthun, *Fictions of the Black Atlantic in American Foundational Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 184, footnote 20.

³⁴ See University of Exeter “Early Modern Practitioners,” <http://practitioners.exeter.ac.uk/practitioners/>. (Accessed 25 November 2018). Surgeons were sometimes understood to be tradesmen, for below the surgeon in rank was the barber-surgeon.

and 1787, acting as a surgeon on board. The surgeon's main job was to examine the slaves when they were purchased³⁵ and to keep the cargo healthy and ready for sale. Falconbridge, and other shipboard physicians, speak plainly of the sexual license onboard:

On board some ships, the common sailors are allowed to have intercourse with such of (sic) the black women whose consent they can procure...The officers are permitted to indulge their passions among them at pleasure, and sometimes are guilty of such brutal excesses, as disgrace human nature.³⁶

In the novel, however, the *Liverpool Merchant's* commander, Captain Thurso, does not allow sexual exploitation (215) because a virgin will bring a higher price at market. Men, however, often were promised sex as a "bonus" for joining a crew. The first mate of *the Liverpool Merchant* tells Daniel Calley,

"Africa, there's a place for you [...] An' the wimmen! Bigob, they are hot [...] 'Sable Venus' [...]. They will do anythin' you want. Hot-they are always on fire [...] it is their nature[...]." (85)

He goes on to tell Daniel that African women have " 'these highly developed muscles in their cunnies, they can fuck you just by squeezin'. They are trained up to it from earliest infancy" (85).

Surgeons, however, provided the day-to-day medical care for most people, in the vein of the general practitioner. See also Samantha Sandassie, "Butchers and Surgeons: Rethinking the 17th-Century English Surgeon. *Remedia* (October 26, 2015). <https://remedianetwork.net/2015/10/26/butchers-surgeons-rethinking-the-17th-century-english-surgeon/>.

³⁵ Alexander Falconbridge, *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa* (London: J. Phillips, George Yard, 1788), 16.

³⁶ Falconbridge, *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa*, 23-24.

The “Sable Venus” is a name for, as Hartman writes, quoting Foucault, the “register of [the black woman’s] encounter with power.”³⁷

Various named Harriot, Phibba, Sara, Joanna, Rachel, Linda, and Sally, she is found everywhere in the Atlantic world. The barracoon, the hollow of the slave ship, the pest-house, the brothel, the cage, the surgeon’s laboratory, the prison, the cane-field, the kitchen, the master’s bedroom--turn out to be exactly the same place and in all of them she is called Venus.³⁸

As Jennifer Morgan points out in “Accounting for the ‘The Most Excruciating Torment,’” slave traders, “[a]t the same time that they were trading bodies [...] were consuming them: They read popular accounts of Africa in which racial difference was constructed through the notion that African women failed to meet expectations for femininity as imagined by Europeans.”³⁹ And sailors consumed women. Ottobah Cugoano, in his “Narrative,” writes: “it was common for the dirty filthy sailors to take the African women and lie upon their bodies.”⁴⁰ Rape, even when

³⁷ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2.

³⁸ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 1.

³⁹ Morgan, “Accounting for ‘The Most Excruciating Torment’: Gender, Slavery, and Trans-Atlantic Passages,” 185.

⁴⁰ Ottobah Cugoano, “Narrative of the Enslavement of Ottobah Cugoano, A Native of Africa; published by himself in the Year 1787.” http://abolition.nysl.org/content/docs/text/narrative_cugoano.pdf. (Accessed 25 November 2018). Hartman also quotes Olaudah Equiano’s narrative:

It was almost a common practice with our clerks and other whites, to commit violent depredations on the chastity of the female slaves [. . .]. I have known our mates to commit these acts most shamefully, to the disgrace, not of Christians only, but of men. I have even known them [to] gratify their brutal passion with females not ten years old; and these abominations some of them practiced to such *scandalous excess*, that one of

unacknowledged, “hovers in the background” of Middle Passage narratives and data, and “slave traders articulated a deeply vexed recognition of captives’ personhood through repetitive acts of sexual violence.”⁴¹ The human act of sexuality becomes monstrous and clinical—an abstraction, to return to Foucault, between words and things.

Black Bodies, White Tastes

If the theory of “libidinal economies,” in the context of the transatlantic slave trade, encompasses the closed circuit of capital that transforms the brutal objectification and sexual exploitation of black women’s bodies into endless profits, then Sara Ahmed’s theory of “affective economies” proves productive when considering the *emotional* relationship engendered between these terrorised women’s bodies and the bodies of middle class white English women in the eighteenth-century. Ahmed argues that “emotions circulate between bodies and signs”.⁴² In an economic model of emotions, she suggests, emotions such as hate “circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement.”⁴³ Hate is therefore necessary to objectify and exploit African women to be considered only as “slaves” who served as signifiers of absolute difference to privileged eighteenth-century “white women”. We would also like to suggest that, within the affective economy created and sustained through

our captains discharged the mate and others on that account. (quoted in Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 6).

⁴¹ Morgan, “Accounting for ‘The Most Excruciating Torment’: Gender, Slavery, and Trans-Atlantic Passages,” 196.

⁴² Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies” *Social Text* 22, No.2 (2004): 117.

⁴³ Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 119.

slavery, these white women's affective values and sexual virtues were also enabled through the slave trade.

In *Sacred Hunger*, the white English woman's body is literally and symbolically deployed to guarantee the economic success of William Kemp's slaving ship, the *Liverpool Merchant*. Kemp takes great pains to have the "Duchess of Devonshire as the Spirit of Commerce," (60) for his figurehead, who is befitting, he declares, because symbolically she "is to represent the enterprise that creates the nation's wealth" (61). While eighteenth-century white women were excluded directly from the economic management of the slave trade, as with the Duchess of Devonshire, they are symbolically subsumed into its economic boundaries, their virtues and values embody the absolute antithesis of the sign of the black female body as "slave". Values deemed both valuable and valuably feminine such as purity, modesty and chastity, are cathected through affective capital, which in turn accrues through the public display of those values that are secured against the value they hold within the marriage market, a market that is in turn supported by slavery.

We want to suggest that the structure of more than the first half of the novel, which intersperses the travails of the slaver with Erasmus Kemp's efforts to secure the love of the nubile Sarah Walpole, underscores the sordid material underpinnings of his pure white "love". In the terms of Ahmed's theory of "affective economies," Kemp's love depends on the hatred of African men and women, but this affective economy is concealed in a fantasy that he alone creates the profits which, in reality, he acquires from trading in black bodies, profits which he believes will secure Sarah's love. As Ahmed argues, this kind of "narrative involves a rewriting of history, in which the labor of others (migrants, slaves) is concealed in a fantasy"⁴⁴ of white

⁴⁴ Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 118.

self-sufficiency and autonomy. The novel's structure suggests that Kemp's "love" is an affective form of capital reliant on his father's investment in the slaver turning a profit. Slave capital is in turn dependent on an absolute hatred of the black female body who must necessarily be reduced to sign and who, as a commodity, is therefore open to sexual abuse and violation. By contrast and in the feminine vocabulary underpinning the culture of sensibility that shaped the eighteenth century, Sarah's sexual allure is coded as modesty. She was known to issue a "delicate shudder [...] a throb of delivery or release" (48) when she wished to emphasize a point. Her characteristic tremble upon which the men around her fixate is embodied within this libidinal economy, which is further sustained through her reciprocated "love" for Kemp. Erasmus Kemp's jealous amorousness and his ardent obsession to possess her in her entirety thus constructs her as a fetishized object of white male desire.

Unsworth clearly aligns the slaving prospects of the *Liverpool Merchant* with Erasmus' marital prospects with Sarah. As Erasmus observes the ship being fitted with sails, the focalisation blends into fantasies about Sarah's physical and emotional being, "the clear pallor of her skin, the slight motions of her hands, the look of her eyelids when she glanced down, the imagined life of her body inside the hooped dress [...]" (12). The image of Sarah's body framed within a hooped dress mirrors Erasmus' observation of the extent to which the body of the ship has been built; it had "not much more than the spine of her keel" (12). He feels deeply that "new shackles were being forged" (13) both to the fortunes of the slaving ship being built and "his feelings for Sarah Wolpert" (13). Thus, the affective capital which propels Erasmus' love and through which he seeks to secure Sarah's hand is linked directly to the need to convert the bodies of slaves into profit making commodities.

The abhorrence of black bodies as both subhuman and sexually rapacious (and therefore excusing the systematic rape of black female slaves) which are also necessary sentiments to afford this love within the circuit of libidinal economies is metaphorically articulated and extended through the amateur theatrical production of *The Enchanted Island*, John Dryden and William Davenant's eighteenth-century rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In the play, Erasmus acts as Ferdinand and Sarah, his lover Miranda. Miranda is not only a paradigm of white maidenhood and virtue, but she and Sarah symbolically contrast with the sexual and moral values assumed of black slave women. Sarah declares to her fellow actors that she should take on the speech that begins "Abhorred slave," a speech surrounded by contention as whether it belongs to Prospero or Miranda remains debatable. In the speech, Caliban is brutally denigrated following his attempted rape of Miranda. Sarah justifies her position by asserting that it is not Prospero "that Caliban tried to ravish" (48). Indeed, this scene in the novel bears significance for a range of reasons. Firstly, it refers to a monologue in Act I Scene II in which Caliban is utterly dehumanised as a slave: he is tarred with a range of racist colonial images historically associated with the colonized African which were used to justify their enslavement. He is not only a sexual predator, but a "savage" (I.ii.508), "[a] thing most brutish" (I.ii.510), stemming from a "vile race [...] in't which good natures/Could not abide to be with" (I.ii.511-14). Miranda chastises him and asserts that he "hadst deserved more than a prison" (I.ii.419).⁴⁵ Secondly, the scene aligns Sarah Walpole with a discourse used to justify the slave trade which would provide the financial profits Erasmus believes necessary for him to be an appealing match in marriage to both her and her father. William Kemp's suicide in the face of the *Liverpool Merchant's* failed slaving

⁴⁵ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (1611) *OpenSourceShakespeare* https://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/play_view.php?WorkID=tempest&Act=1&Scene=2&Scope=scene (Accessed 25 November 2018).

enterprise which Kemp relied upon to save the family's finances results in a double tragedy for Erasmus who loses both his father and his marital prospects with Sarah. Yet it is also crucial that his state of romantic and familial disgrace compels him to declare: "I will restore my father's good name. I will go into sugar." (391) His desire to redress his thwarted love opportunities reiterates the libidinal economy connecting black bodies to white ones through affective capital.

For Sarah Wolpole, the distractions of play rehearsals and the giddy romance with Erasmus are wholly detached from the violence enacted upon the bodies of black girls and young women. Unsworth, however, underscores Sarah's ignorance of the material violence underpinning her cossetted life. As Erasmus and his father pore over maps which help them locate the slave trading company's fort in West Africa, Unsworth juxtaposes this patrician image with the human realities represented as abstract spaces on the map. The omniscient narrator connects the Kemp father and son pair, who are in their office overlooking the water front not only to Sarah Wolpert, but also to two nameless slave girls who die:

His [Kemp Senior] nail touched the mouth of the Kavalli River, made a faint scraping sound across the flats of mud that Paris had seen transfigured by moonlight, stopped at the point where the two bound girl slaves, both roughly of an age with Sarah Wolpert, had choked and drowned in the surf. (353)

Placed against the leisured frivolities of Sarah Wolpert, the narrator offers the stark contrast of the two captured slave girls of a comparable age being tortured and killed. The narrator ironically claims however that it would have "been difficult" for the father and son "to form any true picture of the ship's circumstances or the nature of trading on the Guinea Coast, even if they had

been inclined to try.” He further asserts, again ironically, that “[p]icturing things is bad for business”. For not only do “we have maps,” but “[w]e have graphs and tables and balance sheets and statements of corporate philosophy to help us remain busily and safely in the realm of the abstract and comfort us with a lawful sense of endeavour and lawful profit.” (353) However, through the structure of the novel, the narrator also more subtly links the abstractions of Erasmus’ love for Sarah with the vast workings of the capitalist machinery, epitomised by Erasmus in his fanatical commitment to “the idealism [...] of material progress,” (220) just as the *Paradise Nigger*, on the other hand, epitomises the blind vision of a classless, post-race utopia. Peggy Knapp has pointed out that Erasmus Kemp “seems almost a prototype for the massive entrepreneurial energies of this time and place”⁴⁶ while “[t]he enclave represented in *Sacred Hunger*” and by the *Paradise Nigger* “expresses the yearning for a level of social justice completely at odds with the historical realities of the time.”⁴⁷

However, if the female figures of the novel were to be considered within these comparisons, then the *Paradise Nigger* captures the impossibility of a utopia free from the trappings of class and race, and Sarah, on the other hand, represents a blithe ignorance of the materialist underpinnings of the capitalist circuits of exploitation that necessitate hierarchical structures of class and race. The two characters are aligned in a significant scene involving a fraught discussion between Erasmus and Sarah of a landscape painting with lords and ladies in fashionable dress from an earlier period which hangs in the salon on the Kemp estate. While Erasmus insists that the painting depicts an earthly hunting scene, Sarah asserts, with brio, that it

⁴⁶ Peggy A. Knapp, “Barry Unsworth’s *Sacred Hunger*: History and Utopia” *CLIO: A Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History* 38, no.3 (2009): 323.

⁴⁷ Knapp, “Barry Unsworth’s *Sacred Hunger*: History and Utopia,” 323-4.

reflects a vision of heavenly paradise where the lords and ladies are “blessed” since “[n]othing can touch them, they command everything.” (223) This scene condenses the vast disparity between the Paradise Nigger and Sarah. Her interpretation of privileged freedom and recreation as a paradise landscape is less about her as “idealistic”,⁴⁸ as Knapp argues in an analysis of the same scene, but rather a reflection of Sarah’s detachment from the material world as well as from the realities of the slave trade. She and the Paradise Nigger, linked mnemonically through this scene in Sarah’s reference to paradise, are cast at opposite ends of a social and racial spectrum. The Paradise Nigger’s precarity juxtaposes with Sarah’s security and protection. If the Paradise Nigger’s “paradise” is evidently a foolish dream, the novel stresses instead the reality of the role of white upper class women, like Sarah, from families of considerable economic means. They are passive participants in the relentless drive for capitalist progress through the exploitation of slaves by men like Erasmus who seek to secure their hand in marriage as yet further means of consolidating white profits and racial capitalism.

The Surgeon: Archivist as Appraiser

We want to suggest that white profits derived through the trade of black bodies are guaranteed by white ship surgeons in the vast economy that connects the tasteful sensibilities of white women like Sarah Walpole to the sexual objectification and brutalization of countless and nameless black women. Simon Gikandi, in *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (2011), raises precisely these unspeakable materialist disparities. He contrasts the diary entry on Monday, April 14, 1797 written by the late eighteenth-century theatre critic, Anna Margaretta Larpent, a woman attune to the cultural sensibilities of the time, with the death on the very same day of an

⁴⁸ Knapp, “Barry Unsworth’s *Sacred Hunger*: History and Utopia,” 325.

African woman called Nealee, a captured slave we are only able to glean anything about because Mungo Park mentions her in *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* (1799). Gikandi argues that “[t]hese two women were in the crucible of modern culture, invariably separated by race, geography and fate, but also conjoined by a new global economy that revolved around the sale of black bodies on the West African coast”.⁴⁹ David Dabydeen’s novel, *A Harlot’s Progress* (1999), set in polite society of eighteenth-century England, curiously also features a central character called Mungo, the black servant protagonist and narrator of the novel. Dabydeen suggests that white women can exploit black bodies in a sexual nature as well and can also contribute to their commodification and objectification. Lady Montague, who owns Mungo, gains a form of “sudden release”⁵⁰ from reading sensationalist reports of the sadomasochistic violence perpetrated against African men and women in the slave trade.

We want to suggest that the slave ship’s surgeon is a pivotal figure who mediates this immense gulf that lies between black bodies and white bodies in the eighteenth century. The surgeon deploys reason, enlightenment and civility to create objects out of black bodies, transforming them into the profits which enable the subjective lives of white bodies. As Cilas Kemedjio writes, he plays a central role in the objectification of black women and thus serves the “determining factor in the process of the slave trade.”⁵¹ In the Antilles,

The regulation of the surgical profession translated a true obsession with science. The Edict of 5 August 1681 stipulated that each slave ship should have two surgeons on

⁴⁹ Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press), 54.

⁵⁰ David Dabydeen, *A Harlot’s Progress* (London: Vintage, 2000), 222.

⁵¹ Cilas Kemedjio, “Rape of Bodies, Rape of Souls: From the Surgeon to the Psychiatrist, from the Slave Trade to the Slavery of Comfort in the Work of Edouard Glissant,” *Research in African Literatures* 25, no.2 (Summer 1994): 52.

board, accompanied by two assistant surgeons. The Edict of 1767, which definitively established the status of merchant marine surgeons, revealed the same obsession with technical qualifications...these requirements formed the basis for the scientific authority of the surgeon's profession, and this basis was then used to provide a scientific backing for the slave system.⁵²

The British required a surgeon on board beginning in 1788 in the Dolben regulations bill and he thus becomes a key factor in the bio-politics, the disciplinary machine, of the slave trade: "it is the surgeon's [...] gaze that establishes the slave body."⁵³ The surgeon, to detect defects and to set value, can "explore, talk, touch grope, scratch, sometimes even lick [...]. In the course of the exam all parts of the body were examined, and the women experienced some shame because of the surgeon's investigations."⁵⁴

This examination was the entry into the formal slave process. The surgeon also kept the slaves alive-"the slave body does not have the right to die"⁵⁵-even when they refused to eat, by

⁵² Kemedjio, "Rape of Bodies, Rape of Souls: From the Surgeon to the Psychiatrist, from the Slave Trade to the Slavery of Comfort in the Work of Edouard Glissant," 56.

⁵³ Kemedjio, "Rape of Bodies, Rape of Souls: From the Surgeon to the Psychiatrist, from the Slave Trade to the Slavery of Comfort in the Work of Edouard Glissant," 56.
Hugh Thomas, in *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1440-1870* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 395-396, makes this point as well. He writes that the surgeon's was the decisive voice in the selection of slaves, and that he examined them minutely.

⁵⁴ Tardo-Dino, Frantz. *Le Collier de servitude: condition sanitaire des esclaves aux Antilles francaises du XVIIe au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Editions Caribeenes/ACCT, 1985), 34. Quoted in Kemedjio, "Rape of Bodies, Rape of Souls: From the Surgeon to the Psychiatrist, from the Slave Trade to the Slavery of Comfort in the Work of Edouard Glissant," 57.

⁵⁵ Kemedjio, "Rape of Bodies, Rape of Souls: From the Surgeon to the Psychiatrist, from the Slave Trade to the Slavery of Comfort in the Work of Edouard Glissant," 59.

use of implements like the *speculum oris*.⁵⁶ The surgeon often got a bonus if the mortality rate was low. In addition, British surgeons were required to keep a journal of the voyage, recording deaths of both slaves and sailors, and to deliver that journal to the port officials.

Black genitals are objects of analysis and pleasure on board the ship. Both men and women captives are subjected to examination. As Paris is examining one man, Barton says, “ ‘Don’t forget the cock, Mr. Paris’.” (204) As the examination continues, Paris feels that the process has “passed out of his hands” (204) as Barton tells Paris that they have to examine the man’s anus, placing the captive with his “‘head touchin’ the deck an’ his tail in the air’.” (204) After the examination, the sailors make the man dance. The “procedure” (207) for the women is the same as with the men, “except that they were made to lie down on their backs and open their legs for a more convenient inspection of the genital parts.” (207-208) The crew avidly watches the examination of a young girl, probably a virgin, some making comments; others silent and uneasy.⁵⁷ The girl stiffens when touched intimately by Paris. Barton assess her: “ ‘Nice bit of

⁵⁶ For insight into the diseases the surgeons had to work on see Richard B. Sheridan, “The Guinea Surgeons on the Middle Passage: The Provision of Medical Services in the British Slave Trade,” *The International Journal of African History* 14, no.4 (1981), 601-625. Dysentery, among other fevers and ailments, was the most dangerous to the slave population. The specialty of maritime medicine was founded on the ships, and the doctors learned from Africans how to inoculate people (608).

⁵⁷ It is important to say that many lower or working class men would not have seen women’s bodies and genitals in this way, if they were customers of prostitutes. Prostitution, often, was carried out in an alley, with no one undressing. Prostitution in England, was tolerated “because lower-class men married late for economic reasons [and] there had to be for some outlet for libido.” See Frank McLynn, *Crime and Punishment in Eighteenth Century England* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 97-98. Sharon A. Abbott notes in her entry “Prostitution,” that in nineteenth-century America, prostitution was located in seaport cities and in the urban working class neighborhoods, since reformers equated working-class sexuality with the behavior of animals (378). See Sharon A. Abbott, “Prostitution,” in *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. Bret Carroll (New York: SAGE Publications, 2003), 378-380.

flesh, this ‘un.’ Barton flicked his fingers at the small nipples with casual brutality. ‘Hot little bitch too, I ‘spect when she gets over this. Like all of ‘em’.” (208)

This lewd science of the surgeon, the specialist, is the site at which the “slave trade produced slave bodies.” Then, slave bodies were reproduced “by means of a systematic practice of rape”⁵⁸ which, in the service of capitalism took on a scientific quality⁵⁹ as the product that is the slave has to be reproduced. Kemedjio argues that this ongoing rape is “quite simply an extension of the primordial rape that had been instituted through the surgeon’s expertise.”⁶⁰ The black woman enters history, but silently, as observed specimen, characterized and categorized as “slave.” In this “word,” she enters the system of capitalism as a thing. She also enters history, but with any past erased-as Aimé Césaire writes, “colonization = ‘thingification’”⁶¹- and natural history, Césaire writes, quoting Lapouge, in which “[slavery] is no more abnormal than the domestication of the horse or the ox.”⁶²

⁵⁸ Kemedjio, “Rape of Bodies, Rape of Souls: From the Surgeon to the Psychiatrist, from the Slave Trade to the Slavery of Comfort in the Work of Edouard Glissant,” 55.

⁵⁹ Kemedjio, “Rape of Bodies, Rape of Souls: From the Surgeon to the Psychiatrist, from the Slave Trade to the Slavery of Comfort in the Work of Edouard Glissant,” 59.

⁶⁰ Kemedjio, “Rape of Bodies, Rape of Souls: From the Surgeon to the Psychiatrist, from the Slave Trade to the Slavery of Comfort in the Work of Edouard Glissant,” 61.

⁶¹ Aimé Césaire, “Discourse on Colonialism,” Editions Presence Africaine, trans. Joan Pinkham, (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1955), 42.

⁶² Césaire, “Discourse on Colonialism,” 50. Césaire is quoting from Georges Vacher de Lapouge, *Race et milieu social. Essais d'anthroposociologie* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1909).

Paradise

The successful attempt at disrupting the *Liverpool Merchant's* efforts to transform black bodies into capital is not only represented by the mutiny aboard the ship but in the social experiment in democracy that the *Liverpool Merchant* crew and cargo undertake in colonial Florida. However, these efforts disappear from historical memory except in one trace: The Paradise Nigger. A mythical presence who frames the narrative, he is “an old plantation slave from Carolina,” (1) emancipated, like Frederick Douglass’s grandmother, when he is no longer useful, and who goes finally to New Orleans and talks, “muttering or shouting the details of his life.” (1) He is called “Luther Sawdust,” because his slave name was Luther and an overseer made him eat sawdust (1). The tale he tells is that his father was a white doctor and that he was born in a “place of eternal sunshine” (1). The only historical trace of him, recorded in Charles Townsend Mathers’ *Sketches of Old Louisiana* (a fictitious historical account) cannot be found: Mather’s wife suppressed his “low-life material.” (2) Our omniscient narrator, who has lost his copy of the book, is obsessed with this figure that “haunts [his] imagination.” (2) We would argue that he is the reason for the narrative, as the author attempts to understand the story of this “other.”

The power of the libidinal economy is almost impossible to break, and that is the reality that our narrator comes to understand. When the *Liverpool Merchant* wrecks in Florida, its crew and cargo, under the Enlightenment ideology of Delblanc, begin an experiment in utopian living. Even in this, the patterns that lead to the slave ship begin to repeat.

For Delblanc, the community is an experiment. Paris thinks,

Perhaps there was already present to [Delblanc’s] mind the marvelous opportunity to test his theories, vindicate man’s natural goodness in this dream of a community living

without constraint of government or corruption of money. A ship blown off course, a scuffle of sick and desperate men, the blood of a madman clumsily and almost casually spilt, he had seen in these a truth of politics, a revolution, the founding of a new order. (536)

Wilson is the figure who bridges the slave ship and the community. When the winds are against the slave ship, Thurso flogs Wilson, both to show his power and to call the winds. Thurso gives Wilson eighteen lashes (120), and blood is everywhere. Thurso argues that his flogging has “‘freed the wind’.” (122) Wilson figures in the revolutionary myth that founds the community as well. Jimmy, the translator, teaches the community’s children, and he tells the story of the “sacrifice” of the slave traders, seeking Indians to enslave, who threaten to find the community (513). Thurso is already dead; the crew killed him, and there is no titular “captain,” so the community debates how to deal with these white men. Wilson, who would have let the slavers go, “takes the burden” of all those who would not have killed them (514); he becomes the community scapegoat (515) and villain. Delblanc, the figure who articulates Enlightenment principles, sees that the slavers have to die to bind the community together: “On this blood and that of Wilson [...] their small republic had been founded.” (520)

The community, in its desire to create a space of radical freedom, nevertheless recreates the conditions for capitalism and slavery. From Delblanc and Paris “[some] darkness from [themselves] had intruded” into the paradise (527). Wilson’s death, the binding sacrifice in the community, is evidence of this. Since there are no white women, black women’s bodies are available: the black and white men share a woman. “*Everybody*” in the community kills Wilson because he kills a man over a woman, wanting a wife (548), property of his own. He is “slaughtered like an animal” (548) by black and white men: “It was this that made his death

special [...]. It was justice, it was all the people showing how much they hated the crime.” This death by firing squad, close up, is “was justice when everybody joined in.” (548)

As in slavery, there are no husbands and fathers: “Children lived with their mothers and they had all the men for their fathers” (524). The Paradise Nigger is Kenka, a bi-racial boy whom Paris recognizes as his own (524) son with Tabakali, one of the African women taken into slavery and whom he shares with Nadri (529). The children, then, are children of the mothers, which, when the community falls, means that they are black and can be enslaved. Nadri recognizes this. He chides Paris, in the pidgin English that becomes the lingua franca for the community, for wanting to generalize: “ ‘Partikklar to gen’al is the story of the slave trade’.” (563) He recognizes that Delblanc and Paris want the community to “‘serve some idea in your head’” (563), and that ideology is at the root of enslavement: for an idea, the particular will be sacrificed.

Hierarchies also begin to emerge in the community. A charge of witchcraft, brought against one man, Iboti, really is about property and slavery. Paris realizes, during the Palaver, a meeting to deal with community affairs, that Hambo, the accuser, wants to enslave Iboti: “He understood now that Hambo had never meant to ask for goods in compensation, that he must have intended all along to demand this term of labour.” (568) Iboti is acquitted, but Paris realizes that the problem is a deeper one. Kireku, who does not share a wife (578), also does not share Paris’ and Delblanc’s ideal. He tells Paris that the idea makes the community just another slave place: “‘You tink dis speshul place but it altageddar same adder place’.” (579) Slavery will invariably emerge because

“Now I here I fight for place. Strong man get rich, him slave get rich. Strong man make everybody rich. Everybody dis place happy an’ rich come from trade. Some man not free, nevermind, buggerit, trade free” (581).

They have not transcended or solved the origins of the “sacred hunger.” The idea of progress, bettering oneself through Hegelian struggle, the community suggests, is innate in human nature. His fear is confirmed as he watches the children act out the origin myth, in which “actions of irrevocable violence could be endlessly repeated.” (585). Myth has become history, with all its Western themes of the great men in “heroic protest,” who rebel and execute the tyrant, founding a new social order (585). As Edward Said, reading Vico, argues, the same patterns emerge from human persistence, not “divine originality.” Repetition, as way of “containing experience” and perpetuating the human species, repeats the categories it knows: patriarchy, the desire for unlimited power, the fight for freedom, and slavery.⁶³

In the Florida community, in *Sacred Hunger*, patterns repeat, as commodity capitalism emerges, even in this experiment. It is Nietzsche’s eternal return, and the symbol of this is in institutions, including the double-marriage in the community. Each woman has two husbands, and what emerges is institutionalized power over the bodies of women.⁶⁴ This reality is reinforced as Erasmus Kemp, who has come to kill his cousin, reclaims his property.

The community, once again, becomes cargo, as Kemp claims his father’s property who “had little more distinction in his mind than cattle might have done” (626). Kemp recognizes that Paris might have children among the, now, slaves, but he does not care.

⁶³ Edward Said, “On Repetition,” in *The World, The Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 111ff.

⁶⁴ Edward Said, “On Repetition,” 112.

The cycle has repeated. What Delblanc and Paris do not admit is that, as Nietzsche understood, to repeat the Enlightenment ideology is to change nothing: good and the evil repeat in the capitalist libidinal cycle. As Michael Lacewing explains, only taking responsibility for what one wills, which is to be willing to be held accountable,⁶⁶ is the only way to break the pattern of repetition. The libidinal economy, however, with its focus on profit through bodies, seems not to take any responsibility. What, then is possible? Unsworth offers a response -a small and sad one, yes, but one that emerges from the narrator's imagination to suggest that the experiment, in one way, worked: *The Paradise Nigger*.

Conclusions

Unsworth's alignment of the black body, capitalism and eroticism lets us see how the black woman's body was like Purusha, the Hindu god whose body is splayed out and cut open to found an order. This dismemberment supports social order, one that benefits the powerful. Postcolonialism has ushered in an attempt to remember these bodies, to recover the lost biographies of the enslaved. As Susan Strehle argues, "*Sacred Hunger* also explores the inner worlds of imperialism, its assumption of an arrogant and authoritarian stance based on the superiority of Western Knowledge."⁶⁹ The male characters in the novel certainly epitomize this stance and they stand for perspectives that are writ large across centuries of colonial discourse, but no woman wrote about her experience of the Middle Passage.

⁶⁶ Michael Lacewing, "Nietzsche on Eternal Return," Routledge. <http://documents.routledge-interactive.s3.amazonaws.com/9781138793934/A2/Nietzsche/NietzscheEternalReturn.pdf>. (Accessed 28 November 2018).

⁶⁹ Susan Strehle, "Rewriting Darkness: Imperial knowledge in Barry Unsworth's *Sacred Hunger*" *Studies in the Novel* 43.1 (2011): 75-93. P.77.

Hartman reminds us of the difficulty of the task of narration or re-presentation when what we have is the archive:

Yet how does one recuperate lives entangled with and impossible to differentiate from the terrible utterances that condemned them to death, the account books that identified them as units of value, the invoices that claimed them as property, and the banal chronicles that stripped them of human features? “Can the shock of [such] words,” as Foucault writes, “give rise to a certain effect of beauty mixed with dread?” [...]. And if so, what are the lineaments of this new narrative? Put differently, how does one rewrite the chronicle of a death foretold and anticipated, as a collective biography of dead subjects, as a counter-history of the human, as the practice of freedom?⁷⁰

How do we bridge the corners of the Triangle Trade? How do we fill in the gaps, without suggesting we have told the whole story? How do we address the “othering” of a people? There have been many responses. We can look at the statistics: 13 million or Toni Morrison’s “60 million and more”?⁷¹ We have ship’s logs and archives. We can see the space as a cauldron of creativity that produced a “black” Atlantic. We can engage in tourism and see the slave forts. We can follow the path of the enslaved. We can see the Atlantic as a vast graveyard, and work at finding the traces that lead us to the names of the dead who, often, were only numbered. Even historians, like Melton McLaurin, author of *Celia, A Slave* (1991) and the controversial Hayden White, with his theory of metahistory, have had to admit that the historian writes from both archive and imagination.

⁷⁰ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 3.

⁷¹ See the epigraphs in Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987, 2004). One epigraph dedicates the novel to the “60 million and more” who were in the slave trade.

Writers address the “cracks and traces,” as Toni Morrison has called them, in imagination.⁷² Morrison argues that literature-specifically, the novel-is the only site at which this recovery can be done “appropriately and well.”⁷³ The writer, Unsworth argues, can slip in the gap. History is not an escape route for Unsworth. It points us to borders, marginality and failure. Unsworth said in an interview:

As a child I was beset by the sense of secret pathways, tracks leading away from, running alongside, occasionally touching, the ones everyone knew about. They could be anywhere [...]. There were privileged people who could step into them at will because they knew the access points. Or you could somehow blunder upon them.⁷⁴

This stepping into other paths, Unsworth says, is like possessing a secret, one that conflicts with the “familiar world,” and our familiar understandings. His fiction starts at such “points of access”: with a secret story that needs to be told. The secret, in *Sacred Hunger*, is the Paradise Nigger, who frames the narrative and who structures what Greg Forter argues is a central preoccupation of Unsworth’s *oeuvre* and which underpins his highly self-conscious historical narratives: “the relations between art and power or, more precisely, between the fictions through which regimes of power perpetuate themselves and the power of fiction to expose and help us resist those regimes.” More specifically, Forter argues, Unsworth’s artistic practice reveals the materialist histories of “racial capitalism and colonialism [...and] the death and destructiveness

⁷² Carolyn M. Jones [Medine], “Cracks and Traces: Identity and Narrative in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*” *African American Review* 13: 3(Autumn 1997), 481.

⁷³ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 97-98.

⁷⁴ Harriet Harvey Wood, “Barry Unsworth Obituary,” *The Guardian* 8 June 2012.
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jun/08/barry-unsworth> (Accessed 29 November 2018)

at their core.”⁷⁵ Like Morrison, in *Paradise*, Unsworth imagines someone “other” who breaks, though does not defeat, the repetition of slavery and oppression. Unsworth’s novel, like Morrison’s, ends with a ship. In *Paradise*, the ship approaches an already altered shore: it is littered, with bottle caps and a broken sandal, and a radio plays.⁷⁶ Two women, in perfect companionship, see a ship coming. This ship, however, is “different”: “heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved” are “atremble,” for they, for some time, have been “disconsolate.”⁷⁷ These people come to Paradise, which is an-other space, to “shoulder” endless work “down here.”⁷⁸ Unsworth’s novel ends in a similar interstitial space, with the work that has to be done “down here,” as Luther Sawdust reminds himself that he was his father’s “heart’s delight” even as Big Suzanne participates in the totality of the libidinal economy by being able to recognize those words only as the potential name of a ship.⁷⁹ Where Big Suzanne recognizes capital production, Luther Sawdust means love. Two worlds stand together, and the reader stands in that interstitial space, deciding which really builds paradise, which work to shoulder.

At the core of this issue of the black female body as object of cultural production, as one who is denied the opportunity to love her children, is situated “that thing,” as Lauryn Hill calls it:⁸⁰ the black woman’s body; or, more properly, the genitals and womb that become a site of

⁷⁵ Forter, “Barry Unsworth and the Arts of Power: Historical Memory, Utopian Fictions,” 778.

⁷⁶ Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 318.

⁷⁷ Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 318.

⁷⁸ Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 318.

⁷⁹ The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database records the names of vessels, and it is ironic that many have women’s names, like *The Henrietta Marie*, or are named after tender human relations, like the *Amistad*, meaning “friendship.” See <http://www.slavevoyages.org/>. (Accessed 28 November 2018).

⁸⁰ Lauryn Hill, “That Thing” <http://www.songlyrics.com/lauryn-hill/that-thing-lyrics/>. (Accessed 28 November 2018). Hill writes:

production in the new world. As M. Nourbese Philip writes in “Dis Place--The Space Between,” the black woman’s “cunt and womb” are intimate sites of the public Middle Passage:

The space between the Black woman’s legs becomes. *The place*. Site of oppression-vital to the cultivation and continuation of the outer space in a designated form-the plantation machine [...] the inner space becomes open to all and sundry. Becomes, in fact, a public space. A thoroughfare [...] the space through which new slaves would issue forth.⁸¹

Her body is “Fertilized. Cultivated. Harvested,”⁸² and as she births new slaves, she is the site of the refinement of modern technologies of power. “**Dis place**” is the site of *displacement*, as it “must never be given away by the one who possesses it.”⁸⁴

Unsworth suggests that this endless repetition is interrupted by the Paradise experiment, even though it fails. Kenka/Luther Sawdust/The Paradise Nigger, the bi-racial child of Paris and Tabakali, is our narrator’s hope that repetition does not just create the same over and over, in a process of endless “*dis placement*,” but that something or someone new emerges, even if he or she is erased. The Paradise Nigger’s impact is negligible, but still he tells his story. He is an

Girls you know you better watch out
Some guys, some guys are only about
That thing, that thing, that thing.

⁸¹ M. Nourbese Philip, “Dis Place--The Space Between,” in *A genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays* (Toronto: The Mercury Press, 1997), 76-77.

⁸² M. Nourbese Philip, “Dis Place--The Space Between,” in *A genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays*, 93.

⁸⁴ M. Nourbese Philip, “Dis Place--The Space Between,” in *A genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays*, 96.

alternative “institution.”⁸⁵ Most important, he was his father’s “heart’s delight” (629, 630). More than a memory of place, he has a memory of love and home and belonging beyond/before the terror of slavery and beyond his present life of displacement, hunger, and loss. He is our narrator’s point of conflict—one that argues that the cycle does not just repeat like a terrible machine, but that within that machine, as Nadri reminds us, some particular persons and faces (563) and not just the general pattern of the masters and the enslaved. His counter-memory points to a different future.

He is a trace of a lost past, one that cannot be followed because of lost newspapers and lost books (2): all authoritative--textual--references to him have been lost. When Mather tries to find him, he has disappeared. Even Big Suzanne, one of the figures that Charles Townsend Mather’s wife does not want aligned with her husband, cannot think outside the cycle. As she is feeding the Paradise Nigger, she placates him as he tells her

“We come on a ship [...] Not *here*. ”

“Don’t I know it? Here, take some of this here biscuit, mop [the gravy] up with.”

“Heart’s delight,” he sighs, standing in the doorway with his plate.

Her sweating face smile over at him. “That’s a fine name for a ship.” (630)

Even she cannot believe him. But our narrator remembers, and the sad, marginal figure’s appearance in a lost text haunts our narrator: “Nothing,” he writes, “can restore him now to Mather’s text, but he sits at the entrance to the labyrinth of mine [...]” (2) Given memory and the trace, he has to reinvent the Paradise Nigger, acknowledge that he “invented himself.” (2) We would argue that the Paradise Nigger is the real hero of the text, in all his suffering. He, to the

⁸⁵ Greg Forter, “Barry Unsworth and the Arts of Power: Historical Memory, Utopian Fictions,” 778.

world he lives in, is at least a joke and at best, an unreadable sign of sameness. He is double, and as one double, he raises doubt about the inevitability of the repetition of power. He is, on the one hand, a nigger: just another product of his mother's body. But he also is a man who *is* because he has made himself in history. As Lyotard reminds us, we always are doubly defined: we cannot escape the metanarrative that defines us, but we can talk back to it, defining ourselves-and the Paradise Nigger does.⁸⁶ He is sameness-And yet: he is difference-an alterity, born of a black woman's body, who, embroiled in the terror of history, is, at the same time and in his way, free. The Paradise Nigger and *his story* are sources both for the terror and hope embedded in the history of the black Atlantic.

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⁸⁶ John Randolph LeBlanc and Carolyn M. Jones Medine, *Ancient and Modern Religion and Politics: Negotiating Transitive Spaces and Hybrid Identities* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 163

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